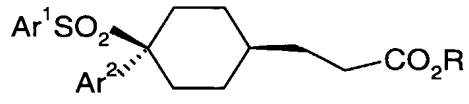
CLAIMS:

1. A process for the preparation of a compound of formula (1):

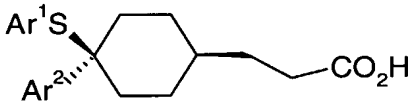


(1)

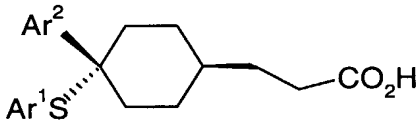
wherein R represents H or an alkali metal, Ar^1 represents 4-chlorophenyl and Ar^2 represents 2,5-difluorophenyl;

comprising the steps of:

(a) stirring a mixture of a *cis*-sulfide of formula (2) and a *trans*-sulfide of formula (3):



(2)



(3)

with 4-chlorobenzenethiol in an acidic medium in which said mixture of sulfides is partially soluble, causing preferential crystallisation of *cis*-sulfide of formula (2);

(b) collecting the *cis*-sulfide of formula (2);

(c) oxidising the *cis*-sulfide of formula (2) to the corresponding sulfone; and optionally

(d) neutralising the product of step (c) with alkali.

2. A process according to claim 1 wherein said acidic medium comprises an acid selected from trifluoroacetic acid and C_{1-4}alkylsulfonic acids in which one or more of the carbon atoms may optionally be perfluorinated.

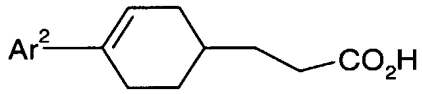
3. The process according to claim 2 wherein the acid is trifluoroacetic acid, trifluoromethanesulfonic acid or methanesulfonic acid.

4. A process according to claim 2 wherein said acidic medium additionally comprises a solvent selected from n-heptane, methylcyclohexane, trifluoroethanol,

hexafluorobenzene, trifluorotoluene, hexafluoropropan-2-ol, acetonitrile and mixtures thereof.

5. A process according to claim 1 wherein the acidic medium is methanesulfonic acid containing from about 5 to about 15 % water by volume.

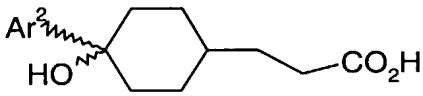
6. A process according to claim 1 wherein the mixture of *cis*-sulfide of formula (2) and *trans*-sulfide of formula (3) is generated by reaction of 4-chlorobenzenethiol with an olefin of formula (4):



(4)

wherein Ar^2 represents 2,5-difluorophenyl,
said reaction being carried out in the acidic medium used in step (a) of the said process.

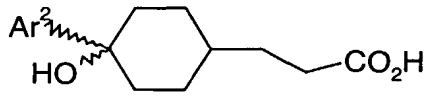
7. A process according to claim 1 wherein the mixture of *cis*-sulfide of formula (2) and *trans*-sulfide of formula (3) is generated by reaction of 4-chlorobenzenethiol with a carbinol of formula (5):



(5)

wherein Ar^2 represents 2,5-difluorophenyl,
said reaction being carried out in the presence of a Lewis acid, and the mixture of sulfides being isolated prior to carrying out step (a) of the said process.

8. A process according to claim 1 wherein the mixture of *cis*-sulfide of formula (2) and *trans*-sulfide of formula (3) is generated by reaction of 4-chlorobenzenethiol with a carbinol of formula (5):



(5)

wherein Ar^2 represents 2,5-difluorophenyl,

said reaction being carried out in the acidic medium used in step (a) of the said process.

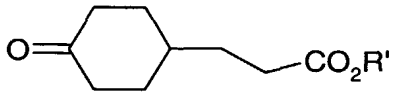
9. A process according to claim 6 or claim 8 wherein the acidic medium comprises an acid and hexafluoropropan-2-ol together with a co-solvent selected from perfluorohexane and perfluorinated 2-butyltetrahydrofuran.

10. A process according to claim 9 wherein the acid is trifluoromethanesulfonic acid.

11. A process according to claim 6 or claim 8 wherein the acidic medium is methanesulfonic acid containing from about 5 to about 15 % water by volume.

12. A process according to claim 7 or claim 8 wherein the carbinol of formula (5) is prepared by:

(a) conversion of carboxylic acid (6a) to magnesium salt (6b):



(6) (a) R' = H
(b) R' = MgX

(b) reaction of (6b) with Ar^2-M'; and

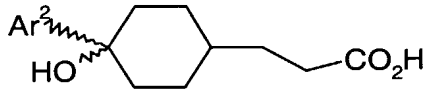
(c) treatment of the resulting product with acid;

wherein M' represents Li, MgX or CeX_2;

X represents Cl, Br or I; and

Ar^2 represents 2,5-difluorophenyl.

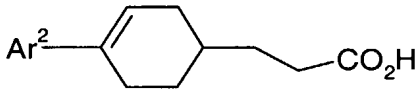
13. The compound of formula (5):



(5)

where Ar^2 is 2,5-difluorophenyl.

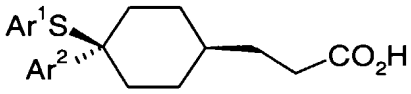
14. The compound of formula (4):



(4)

wherein Ar^2 is 2,5-difluorophenyl.

15. The compound of formula (2):



(2)

where Ar^1 is 4-chlorophenyl and Ar^2 is 2,5-difluorophenyl.